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Other Voices

Gender Studies

Blurred Lines: Gender in Advertising

Abstract:

By the time they reach high school, students have been so deluged by both media and advertising messages that they may have become somewhat immune to them. Looking at ads under a focus of gender studies can illuminate the ways that many of the messages and themes challenge, support, or prolong certain established gender norms. Students will examine images from two ad campaigns, either from a 2014 Nine West campaign, or a 2011 Christian Louboutin campaign (both featuring women's shoes), and discuss how the image contributes to, defies, or introduces new gender roles. Both of these ad campaigns feature themes and messages which were critically considered to be everything from humorous and tongue-in-cheek, to degrading and sexist. Students who are best equipped to undertake this lesson would have already spent time reading at least a few introductory texts on gender studies, so they would have some of the vocabulary at hand. This will also allow for a more sophisticated discussion. Because conversations dealing with gender can get both very heated and very personal, instructors may opt to introduce this lesson for upper-level students.

Standards:

SL.9-10.2. Integrate multiple sources of information presented in diverse media or formats (e.g., visually, quantitatively, orally) evaluating the credibility and accuracy of each source.

SL 9-10.4. Present information, findings, and supporting evidence clearly, concisely, and logically such that listeners can follow the line of reasoning and the organization, development, substance, and style are appropriate to purpose, audience, and task.

Procedure:

Students can be put into small groups (4-5 students, depending on class size). Once in their groups, they should be given an ad, either from the Nine West or Christian Louboutin ad campaigns. Students in my class were asked the following questions and directed to discuss them in their groups and take notes on the responses (questions can be adapted as desired for specific classes).

Discussion questions:

- What messages does this ad project? How does it do so?
- What theme(s) are portrayed in the ad? Do those appear to be successfully conveyed?
- Target audience? Was this audience well represented by the ad structure?
- How could this ad be placed within a gender discussion? What "typical" gender roles or stereotypes does it play into?

Students were also asked to consider the target audiences of the various brands in your discussions (Louboutin is known as an extremely high end, expensive, and desirable entity, while Nine West is a far more mainstream brand.)

The students can be given as much time in their groups as the instructor sees fit. Each group should be ready to present their findings and ideas to the whole class, and then a large-group discussion could ensue from that.

Other variations on this lesson: the instructor could present the groups with a “brand ambassador” who has to “sell” the ad campaign to the group, who could represent the company or any other entity as desired (shoe store, women’s advocacy group, etc). The ambassador would have to consider their audience when deciding how to best promote their ad campaign, which also allows the lesson to introduce ideas of rhetorical approach and argumentation. Another option would be to rotate the pictures among the groups, and have groups look for any variations/differences between the two campaigns. I have also utilized the internet in class to have students finish the class period by looking up men’s shoe ads from the last 50 years, and examining both the difference in how shoes are marketed to men, as well as the contents of the ads themselves. Additionally, while I focused on two campaigns for women’s shoes, any comparable item could be utilized as an advertisement focus.

Materials:

Instructors may find it highly beneficial to the lesson to distribute copies images to each group (vs. directing the students to try and find them on a computer) in order to have the students stay on task. Because of the necessity in seeing the advertisement as it was originally made, color-copies are highly preferred. All images utilized by the campaigns can be found through a Google search.